

Communication

How to Really Listen

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One morning, my wife Eleanor woke up, turned over, and said, "I am not looking forward to this day." I asked her why.

What came out is that we were at the start of the Jewish high holy day season, which means colder weather and three weeks of big social meals, long religious services, broken routines, and children out of school. Eleanor didn't grow up with these traditions, and they can be overwhelming.

Now, I run a management consulting company; problem solving is what I do. So it didn't take me long to jump in.

"Cold weather means ski season is about to start," I said. "You love skiing. And these holiday meals are fun and filled with people you love — they'll make you feel better. And I'll be with you; you won't be alone with the kids. Also, you know, Jesus was Jewish, so it's kind of your tradition too."

Even as I said it, I knew that last one was a reach. It became clear that I was making her feel worse and now she wasn't just sad, she was angry.

And when she got angry, I felt myself get angry too. And self-righteous. *Here I am trying to help her and this is what I get?*

But then I smartened up. Instead of giving in to my anger, which would have really blown things up, I shut up and listened. When I did, I began to hear the real stuff, the things that neither of us was actually saying.

What I discovered was that she was upset because the focus on mothers during the Jewish holidays taps into her insecurities about motherhood, not being a Jewish mom, and not having time to spend on her own work.

I also discovered that my own babbling wasn't so much to help her feel better as to help me feel better. I'm the reason she's in New York City, living through cold winters, and part of a Jewish family.

In other words, by trying to make her feel better, I was doing the opposite of making her feel better. I was *arguing* with her. In fact, most of the time when we try to make people feel better, we end up arguing with them because we're contradicting what they're feeling. Which, inevitably, makes them feel worse.

Listening, it turns out, is magic. Not only did it help me understand what was going on with both of us, but it helped Eleanor feel better, too. It made her feel that she wasn't alone in her feelings; I was with her.

All I had to do was listen.

But listening isn't easy. The more we listen to others, the more likely we will react — or overreact — to what they say. Listening, it turns out, is much harder than speaking. We have to allow things we might disagree with to hang in the air. We have to move over a little and create space for those things to linger.

That kind of listening takes tremendous courage.

But if we're interested in learning — about ourselves as well as others — then it's worth it. And if we're interested in being connected to others, showing them respect, helping them feel better, and solving problems between us, than it's more than worth it. It's essential.

Until people feel heard, they will fight to be heard. But once they are heard, there is little left to fight

for, and then we can move on, not as "us vs. them" but simply as "us."

So how do you listen in a way that transforms conversations and relationships?

- **Actually listen.** And only listen. That means don't multitask. I'm not just talking about doing email, surfing the web, or creating a grocery list. Thinking about what you're going to say next counts as multitasking. Simply focus on what the other person is saying.
- **Repeat back.** This feels a little silly at first but works magic. If someone says she is angry about the decision you just made, you can say "you're angry about the decision I just made." I know, I know, she just said that. But it shows you're listening and it communicates to the other person that she's been heard. If you don't have the courage to try it with an adult, try it with a child. You'll see what a difference it makes and it will embolden you to try it with a colleague or your spouse.
- **Ask questions.** Explore the other person's thoughts and feelings more deeply. And "You don't really believe that, do you?" does not count as a question. You are not using the Socratic method to prove your point; you are trying to better understand what's going on so you can better understand your partner in this conversation.

Really listening can feel risky, which seems strange because listening doesn't materially change anything. But sometimes you'll hear things that are hard to hear.

Remember that listening is not the same thing as agreeing. And it will never force you to take any particular action. If anything, it will reduce the intensity of people's insistence that you take a specific action. Because in many cases what they're looking for is proof that you've heard them. So if they feel you've really heard them, their need for action diminishes.

As Eleanor spoke, I noticed my own resistance to various things she was saying. There's no question that it's hard to really listen. But once I relaxed into it, I heard her in a much deeper way. That made her feel better. Call me co-dependent, but it made me feel better too.

It turns out that sometimes, just listening is problem-solving.

Your Body Language Speaks for You in Meetings

Charalambos Vlachoutsicos

Besides our choice of words and the volume and tone of a voice, gestures, posture and facial expressions all convey powerful messages to the people we are talking to, which is precisely why everyone pays close attention to other people's body language. What's more, some research suggests that your body language can even affect your hormones, which affect your decisions and attitudes to risk. In other words, how we say what we say to people is at least as important as what we say to them.

Yet for all the care we take to read other people's body language, we're remarkably unconscious when it comes to our own. This is largely, I think, because knowledge of our true selves is hard and does not come naturally to us. Most of us are not what we think we are and therefore we need to question our self-image, which all too often is an idealized version of our true selves.

I have found over the course of a long career that the best way to become more aware of myself and of the impact of my own largely unconscious behaviour is to systematically run through some standard drivers of negative body language. Before you go into a meeting, for example, make a habit of asking yourself the following:

- **When did I last eat?** Physical conditions have a powerful impact on one's emotional state and therefore on the body language colleagues and subordinates will be watching so closely. If you haven't eaten for several hours, do so. Make sure you've visited the toilet recently. Be careful about having that extra cup of coffee just before you go in.
- **Do I have issues with anyone I'm meeting?** If you don't make an effort to put your feelings about the people you're meeting front of mind, those feelings will influence your emotional state. Suppose you are irritated with a particular subordinate. Your irritation could come through in the way you talk or position your body in relation to her (are you closed off, are your arms folded?), which could well inhibit her from making a useful contribution. Before going into a meeting, note the issues and feelings you have with the people you will be engaging with.
- **Am I prepared?** If you aren't prepared for a meeting you'll have to rely on winging it. In that case you will concentrate on making sure you keep up with the discussion and don't show your ignorance. People who aren't well prepared end up compensating by taking a lot of airtime to make others think that they are well informed. So, whatever body language faults they have get amplified. What's more, they are unlikely to think about their body language if they are concentrating on winging it. So if you're not prepared it's better to postpone a meeting until you are or admit that you are not. If you can't or won't do either of these, the best thing is to keep quiet and make sure you're better prepared the next time.
- **Am I angry?** If you are, just take time out. Anger doesn't play well with any form of communication, non-verbal and verbal alike. Years ago, when I was running my family's export-import business in Greece, I found out that one of my subordinates had made a serious mistake resulting in the imposition of a stiff fine by the Greek Customs. I was about to call him to my office to give him hell when it occurred to me that I had better calm down. So I waited and later went to his desk and told him quietly that I was aware of the mistake and requested him to write a memo explaining why the mistake had happened and how it could be avoided in the future. The next day I received a detailed report, which contained a couple of very useful process suggestions that I decided to implement in the company.

The pre-flight prep I've outlined is essential but you have to keep reading the dials after you take off as well. You won't be able to stay completely on top of things, of course, but it will help if you periodically ask yourself:



affectus

- **Am I fidgeting?** If you're fairly still and listening then all is probably well. But if you're shifting about in your chair, drumming your fingers, doodling or, worst of all looking at your phone, then you can be pretty sure that the person talking is likely to be feeling that you're not interested in what they have to say. The question also leads naturally to thinking about how you are sitting or standing: are you looking at the person talking or out of the window? Is your pose attentive or are you leaning back with arms folded, indicating impatience or withdrawn scepticism? This is especially important if you're the boss because everyone else will be following every arch of your eyebrow.
- **Am I interrupting?** In any healthy debate people will occasionally interrupt. But if you do it a lot, people may feel that you're not open and not listening carefully to what they are saying — or indeed that you're overcompensating for your ignorance. When you are seen to deny the validity of a person's argument that person will withdraw and will take offense. Asking yourself if you're interrupting too much also leads naturally thinking about how you are communicating with your body, expressions, and gestures: are you acknowledging the other people, are you smiling at them or looking angry?

Hard-pressed managers are at risk of messing up their encounters with their subordinates through failing to keep tabs on their own body language. Everyone prepares like crazy for a meeting with someone more important, and most people have some concern about looking smart, polite and engaged in front of the boss, which forces them to pay some attention to the way they behave. But bosses don't have that motivation and all too seldom take the time to think about how they conduct their interactions with subordinates and colleagues.

We cannot expect to be able to iron out all our communication faults but we should try at least to become aware of them and of their negative impact. In any case, awareness of our interactive behaviour is self-fulfilling and, therefore, is gradually internalized and thus requires less and less conscious effort on our part.
